"No Piece, No Peace": Class Contradictions in the Resurging Black Freedom Movement

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By Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua <SChajua@aol.com>, August 1999

Something exciting is happening in the "Gateway City." Battles of national significance are being waged in the hot humid plains between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. In St. Louis, African Americans are demanding contracts and jobs at a rate approaching proportionality. Two significant protests centering on minority set-asides for Black contractors and jobs for Black workers occurred over the past month-and-a-half.

On June 26, demonstrators blocked I-70, the only interstate highway crossing the state, as a way to bring local and national attention to the grave disparities within the construction industries in the state of Missouri; 31 demonstrators were arrested. A little more than two weeks later, on Monday, July 12 protest leaders mobilized ten times as many demonstrators. Demonstrators succeeded in stopping early morning rush hour traffic on the I-70 for more than forty minutes. Nearly 1,000 spectators ventured out to observe the 6:30 a.m. action and police arrested 125 people. Tactically these militant actions are revitalizing the Black Freedom Movement, but strategically the goals may not be radical enough.

Demonstrations such as these elucidate the failure of many affirmative action programs in leveling the playing field for Black workers. Studies of contracts given to disadvantaged business enterprises (DBE) in Missouri reveal both why affirmative action is necessary and its limitations. Exploration of minority set-asides demonstrates the contradiction between race and gender. White women have reaped far more from affirmative action programs than have Blacks. In the Sunday, July 25 issue of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch Bill Smith and Carolyn Tuft report that companies allegedly owned by white women receive more than twice as many contracts as companies allegedly owned by Black men or women. In the last 18 months white women’s construction firms have received 6 percent of the $306 million contracts compared to less than 3 percent for Black--owned firms.

Concerning contracts for I-70 and Highway 40, the two major freeways in the St. Louis metropolitan area companies allegedly owned by white women and Blacks have gotten 8.6 percent and 5.4 of the contracts, respectively. Although white women have been the major beneficiaries of minority set-asides they have been visibly absent from the struggles to preserve affirmative action. Black entrepreneurs’ are also squeezed out of minority set-asides by white men who practice corporate minstrelsy. If white dominated companies with "Black faces" are removed from the state’s disadvantaged business list, Black contractor participation on St. Louis-based construction projects would plunge to less than 2
These disparities underscore the continuing significance of racial oppression, even among the elite. Racism accounts for the underdevelopment of Black enterprises. Despite a 46% increase in African American-owned businesses from 1987 to 1992, they are still less than 3 percent of all U.S. businesses. Although their receipts grew 63% during the same period, Black enterprises still only receive about 1% of the nation’s gross receipts. Black capitalists suffer from nonexploitative economic oppression. They are discriminated against by financial institutions and government agencies, and also white business persons who largely refuse to do business with them.

How can Black entrepreneurs amass capital? Historically they have used two main strategies: (1) promote "buy Black" campaigns; and (2) mount mass campaigns to force concessions from government and white controlled corporations. In the mid-1990s Jesse Jackson elaborated a little used third way. Built on the conservative principles of voluntarism Jackson’s Wall Street Project appeals to corporations to voluntarily enter into mentor-protege relationships with Black businesses. Thus far white corporations have been slow to adopt the partnerships advocated by Jackson.

Consequently, local Black entrepreneurs are being forced to readopt the militant tactics associated with option two. Malik Ahmed whose organization Better Family Life has a contract to operate a job training center expressed the motivations behind middle class Blacks’ initiation of civil disobedience. According to Ahmed, due to Black "complacency and docility over the past 20-to-25 years" the white power structure determined they could "dis" Blacks at will. He told Sylvester Brown, Jr., the publisher of Take Five, a progressive Black magazine, that Blacks had to "be activists" because "It seems the only way our community will prosper." Translation? The only way Black entrepreneurs can make Black capitalism viable is to coerce capital from white corporations and the state.

Effective militant direct action is predicated on a high degree of unity. Building Black unity has always been difficult, and is especially hard given the growing class disparities in the African American community. In St. Louis, Black entrepreneurs built a mass base of support the only way they could, by linking the struggles between contracts and jobs; that is, by highlighting the similar needs of both Black entrepreneurs and Black workers.

Comments by Ahmed and Eddie Hasan, the Executive Director of MOKAN, a consortium that assists minority contractors shows this linkage. Ahmed claimed "It’s important for a new leadership to emerge to show that we have the ability to strike business deals with very powerful institutions . . . " Meanwhile Hasan asserted "It’s time for us to stand up as men and demand that our people also make $20 to $30 an hour." The Coalition for North St. Louis Economic Development demanded that Blacks receive 25% of St. Louis-based state construction contracts and 35% of construction jobs. The demands represent the interests of different classes in the African American community: contracts for middle class entrepreneurs and jobs for the masses of under and unemployed Black workers. This is the context in which the Coalition for North St. Louis Economic Development twice shut down traffic on I-70.

Despite the coalition’s early militancy, they ultimately reached a highly controversial settlement. The agreement between the coalition and Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan involves four major aspects:

- Creation of a job training center in north St. Louis to recruit and train racial minorities.
- Hiring of an outside group to work with and monitor disadvantaged-business programs.
- Voluntary agreements by I-70 contractors to increase racial minority participation.
- U.S. Transportation Department will conduct a study to establish racial minority contractor and employment goals for the St. Louis area.
Many hailed the agreement, including several "national Black leaders." For instance, Martin Luther King III, Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, stated "It will always be written when that revamping occurs, that the impetus to start the movement again started in St. Louis." He may very well be right. Two white male-owned construction firms, KCI Construction Co. and Millstone Bangert Inc., have already" voluntarily" agreed to raise racial minority subcontracting work by $500,000 and reportedly have promised to hire more racial minority workers. MOKAN is poised to become the disadvantaged-business program’s outside monitoring agency and manager of the job training facility, having recently submitted a $1.8 million proposal.

It thus appears that the recent militant united Black action taken in St. Louis and the subsequent settlement worked, primarily for a few. It feels like one of Jesse Jackson, Sr.’s 1970s "covenants." You know, where Black entrepreneurs got millions in contracts and Black workers got dead end job training programs. Not surprisingly, the agreement privileges the class interests of the Black political-professional-entrepreneurial elite and may in fact be inconsequential to Black workers.

Many people are angry and disappointed by the lack of consideration of workers’ interest and perspective. It is not surprising, the petty bourgeoisie over played their hand. For example, conveniently forgetting their working class brothers and sisters, march leaders began chanting "No Contracts, No Peace!" during the I-70 shutdown July 12! The slogan "Jobs and Justice!" was not heard. This was a prelude to the relegation of immediate jobs to the future. None of the protest leaders, local or national linked the I-70 struggle to the St. Louis Campaign for a living wage or other struggles in the city.

To address this oversight, talk show host Liz Brown is giving voice to Black working class rage. Brown and others are challenging the back room deal and the political-professional-entrepreneurial elite who orchestrated it. She is calling for continuing the postponed shutdown of Highway 40. At this time it is unclear whether mass discontent will be organized by Brown or other alleged radicals.

In the shadow of the St. Louis Arch (commemorating "western expansion"), the Black Freedom Movement is being forced forward by the dynamic interaction between racial commonalities and class contradictions. Two things are important about the I-70 demonstrations? First, tactically by pushing contemporary protest beyond symbolic demonstrations this entrepreneur-led coalition has rehabilitated the march as a militant offensive weapon. Second, from the perspective of the Black working class and poor, the current settlement seems a sellout. The agreement highlights the need for poor and working class Blacks to pursue their own class interests. The I-70 actions deserved united Black community support, but only if the jobs issue is placed on par with contracts and only if the coalition is committed to supporting the living wage campaign.

What is needed now? Democracy. Unity and trust can only be rebuilt through democratic procedures. If the agreement is the best that could be obtained under the current conditions than the coalition’s leaders need to practice what the African National Congress calls "transparency." It is high time that closed door "leadership summits" are replaced with mass public meetings. Democracy. Now is the time for MOKAN’s attorney, Eric Vickers to answer the woman who demanded discussion of the agreement. Hold a public meeting and allow the people to evaluate the agreement.

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